

U.S. ENGAGEMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPE, ENERGY, THE
ENVIRONMENT AND CYBER

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

October 28, 2021

Serial No. 117-87

Printed for the use of the Committee on Foreign Affairs



Available: <http://www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/>, <http://DFCs.house.gov/>,
or <http://www.govinfo.gov>

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

45-903PDF

WASHINGTON : 2022

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Thursday, October 28, 2021

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPE, ENERGY, THE
ENVIRONMENT AND CYBER,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 11:31 a.m., via Webex, Hon. William R. Keating (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. KEATING. The House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee will come to order without objection. The Chair is authorized to declare a recess of the Committee at any point, and all members will have 5 days to submit statements, extraneous material, and questions for the record, subject to the length limitation in the rules. To insert something into the record, please have your staff email the previously mentioned address or contact full committee staff.

Please keep your video function on at all times, even when you're not recognized by the Chair. Members are responsible for muting and unmuting themselves, and please remember to mute yourself after you finish speaking. Consistent with House Resolution 965 and the accompanied regulations, staff will only mute members and witnesses, as appropriate, when they're not under recognition to eliminate background noise.

I see that we have a quorum. And before I begin my opening statement, I will just thank everyone, first thank our witness, Deputy Assistant Secretary Escobar, for arranging the change in your schedule. I want to thank the members that are present for their ability to change their schedule around to accommodate this. It's an unusual day here at Capitol Hill. It's a day that the President has addressed the Democratic Caucus on legislation. It's a day that we all are scrambling and changing our schedules, and it's a day, I think, that is appropriate for today's subject matter because we're talking about democracy, often messy, often unscripted, often a case where, at least in our country, there's no rule by decree. A president just cannot come down and tell the country and all the people what's going to be done. He has to come to a representative House in this democracy to do that, and each of us have the ability to represent our districts in dealing with those decisions. So I think it's an appropriate day for this because our very democracy is something that the stakes are very high in in the Western Balkans.

So I'll now begin my opening remarks. The Western Balkans are a complex, dynamic, geostrategic region in Europe. As a result of the changing boundaries from historic empires, the Western Balkans remains incredibly multiethnic, as well as religiously, geo-

graphically, linguistically, and culturally diverse. This region has also experienced a horrific amount of violence in its modern history.

At the same time, the Western Balkans have worked hard to establish democracy and foster the political process necessary to speed integration into the European Union. Due to these efforts, three of the Western Balkan nations, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, have successfully joined NATO. U.S. leadership and engagement, often in coordination with the efforts undertaken by the European Union and NATO, has been essential to the region's peace and stability. The U.S. has facilitated in support of the Western Balkans moving down a pro-Western path based on market liberalization, promotion of human rights, anti-corruption, and freedom of speech. The U.S. and this Congress continues to remain staunch advocates of progress through our mediation and democratic development initiatives in the region.

So today we're holding this hearing, a day in the midst of months of profound change and uncertainty in the Western Balkans. It's now more clear than ever that there's still more work to be done. To that end, I echo Secretary of State Blinken and EU High Representative Borrell's recent joint statement, a statement supporting the accension of Western Balkan countries to the European Union and consider this issue a top priority of the region.

North Macedonia made significant concessions during the Prespa Agreement; and Albania, whose accension is paired with North Macedonia, says some of the highest pro-EU sentiment amongst its population in the entire region. Delayed accension to the process for these countries and the rest of the region has allowed malign actors to increase their influence and sow discord and distrust amongst Western Balkan populations.

I call on the EU to expedite the accension process for countries who meet the appropriate conditions and to work with Bulgaria to ensure North Macedonia and Albania's accension talks can begin by the end of the year.

At the same time, Freedom House, in 2021, ranked all six Western Balkan countries as partly free, citing flawed electrical processes, a narrowing space for press freedoms, as well as a lack of consistent rule of law throughout the region. Further, non-normalization relations between nations continue to spur instability throughout the entire region. To meet these challenges in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I believe further reform, the accension of destabilizing rhetoric, the productive dialog between populations and ethnic groups to ultimately maintain peace, foster reconciliation and respect for democratic norms are all imperative. Separatist rhetoric and illegal legislation in the Republika Srpska only further destabilizes a country with deep societal divisions.

In addition, while a temporary EU-mediated deal was struck to ease a recent escalation in tensions between Kosovo and Serbia, the lack of normalized relations between the two countries continue to hinder the stability of the entire region. A permanent solution through the EU-led dialog must be achieved, and I look forward to hearing from our witness about how the U.S. is helping to facilitate such an agreement.

Yet, despite those ongoing conflicts and delayed negotiation processes, there are promising issues in the region. I continue to support interregional economic cooperation and believe that expanded trade throughout the Western Balkans will only support peace and democratic development.

Furthermore, renewed U.S.-European cooperation needs greater cooperation from the NATO point. Finally, the use of sanctions by this Administration, including recent changes to the Western Balkans sanction program in June 2021 is a necessary move to stifle the influence of corrupt local actors who seek personal gain over democratic processes and to those who seek to destabilize regional peace agreements. I call upon the Administration to consider the use of sanctions, when appropriate.

To elaborate on the U.S. policy and engagement in Western Balkans, we have invited Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar from the Department of State to provide testimony before the subcommittee today. This is the first House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on the Western Balkans in this congress, and Mr. Escobar's testimony is essential to better understand the Biden Administration's approach to the region as a whole.

Ultimately, the Western Balkans remain a region with significant potential. Despite changing American leadership, Congress's commitment to finding long-term solutions in the region and maintaining our engagements and partnerships from Skopje to Podgorica, from Pristina to Sarajevo. We must continue to be engaged, and this region must remain strong. The coming weeks and months will be telling, and I look forward to hearing from Mr. Escobar as to how we, in Congress, can be helpful in achieving those long-term solutions that have, up until now, remained too elusive.

I now turn to Ranking Member Mr. Fitzpatrick for his opening remarks.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Morning. Thank you, Chairman Keating and thank you to our guest, Deputy Assistant Secretary Escobar, for being here with us today to discuss U.S. engagement in the Western Balkans.

Over the last three decades, the United States has actively engaged in promoting peace, democracy, and the rule of law across the region. The U.S. and NATO air campaigns altered the violence against the Kosovo-Albanian population by Milosevic's regime, and NATO has since maintained security presence in the country to ease tensions. The U.S. also led a NATO mission to help end the Bosnian War and brokered the Dayton Peace Agreement that stands to this day.

Building on this legacy, the U.S. commitment to supporting regional cooperation, peace processes, resistance to polarization, bring corruption to light, and building trust in democratic institutions in the Western Balkans must remain steadfast. I am particularly concerned about governance challenges in Bosnia that have the potential to undermine the Dayton Agreement, and I am glad to see this Administration directs focus on this issue, including efforts from our witness today and Matt Palmer, who has been appointed special envoy for election reforms in Bosnia.

I look forward to hearing about this Administration's plans on how its proposed electoral reforms will bring Bosnia's political system in line with European court rulings and the requirements of European integration. The promise of EU membership remains the key to unlocking long-sought reforms across the region.

Opening accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania will provide much needed hope to people in the region and demonstrate that the West is fully supportive of their Euro-Atlantic trajectory, and failure to push forward with Euro-Atlantic integration will leave the Western Balkans more vulnerable to the autocrats in Moscow and Beijing.

Russia's campaign against the Western Balkans follows a familiar playbook of sowing chaos, exploiting corruption and patronage networks, and weaponizing energy. Montenegro provides a stark example. In 2016, Russia supported two attempts against pro-Western government for seeking to join the NATO alliance. Likewise, China has exploited the vacuum left in the Western Balkans by the stalled progress toward Euro-Atlantic integration through massive investments in infrastructure. The Belt and Road Initiative is China's Trojan Horse, and the Western Balkans has burdened nations with unimaginable debt and deep in the corruption and patronage networks that have plagued the region for years.

It is my hope today that Deputy Assistant Secretary Escobar can discuss how the United States can continue to support peace, stability, democracy, and the rule of law in the Western Balkans. Moreover, I hope we can learn more about how the U.S. and Europe are working to build the region's resilience against Russian and PRC malign influence. We must remain vigilant in our efforts to deter authoritarian nations from destabilizing the region's Euro-Atlantic integration, and it is in the interest of both the United States and Europe and what the people of the Balkans really want.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. KEATING. I thank the ranking member for his comments. And I'll now introduce our witness. I want to thank you for being here today, Deputy Assistant Escobar. Mr. Gabriel Escobar is the Deputy Assistant Secretary responsible for the Western Balkans at the U.S. Department of State. He also oversees the Office of Press and Public Diplomacy. Mr. Escobar has held a variety of leadership positions at the State Department, including Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy-Belgrade and Economic Minister Counselor at the U.S. Embassy-Baghdad. He is also the brother of one of our colleagues, Representative Escobar, and we welcome you here today. I now will recognize you for 5 minutes, giving you great flexibility if you'd like to exceed that without objection, to read your prepared statement and to be made part of the record. Mr. Escobar, you're now recognized for your opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF GABRIEL ESCOBAR, ASSISTANT DEPUTY
SECRETARY, DEPARTMENT OF STATE**

Mr. ESCOBAR. Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Fitzpatrick, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to discuss U.S. engagement in the Western Balkans. For over three decades, the region has been the focus of sustained U.S. attention and investment, and the Biden Administration shares this

commitment to a region that is historically, politically, culturally, and geographically part of Europe. Our goal for all six countries of the region is to support their successful integration into European institutions and eventual accession to the EU. We are working with our EU partners to reinforce the message that accession remains a real possibility within a realistic timeframe, an incentive critical to the aspirants' continued political will to implement difficult reforms and bolster resistance to harmful Russian and Chinese influence and activities on Europe's doorstep.

The strongest message the EU could give now is to schedule the start of North Macedonia and Albania's EU accession negotiations before the end of this calendar year. Both countries did the difficult work required. Delays since the European Council's March 2020 decision to begin that process are sowing doubt throughout the region and risk dashing the hopes of a new generation that wants a European future. That is why Secretary Blinken and EU High Representative Josep Borrell on October 14 released a public statement jointly reinforcing that EU accession is the only way forward for the region.

Peace, stability, and prosperity through EU integration is our shared goal, and we are working together toward that objective, including by supporting the EU-facilitated Dialogue as the best path to normalizing relations between Serbia and Kosovo. And that is why I traveled to Brussels last month to back EU Special Representative Miroslav Lajcak in efforts to press both sides to de-escalate tensions over vehicle registration and to secure agreement on a solution that created space for them to focus on more complicated issues. Together we made clear that the Dialogue is the forum in which both sides, as equals, must work to resolve their differences and normalize relations, ideally through mutual recognition.

A vibrant political process yielded significant change in Montenegro in August 2020. We have made clear that our partnership with Montenegro is a partnership with the country, its people, and their democratic institutions, rather than any one political party. We are prepared to work with all Montenegrin partners that share the vision of a sovereign, inclusive, democratic country that is advancing necessary reforms as an EU aspirant while upholding its solemn pledges as a stalwart NATO Ally. This can be furthered through inclusive dialog, including with civil society, focused on goals that unite Montenegrins: peace, democratic progress, economic development, rather than on identity politics and nationalist rhetoric that divides them.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the U.S. remains critical to preserving the country's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the gains of the last 26 years under the Dayton Peace Agreement. We are now working with the EU and others to press for reforms to secure Bosnia's place in the Euro-Atlantic community. Bosnia's clear path from Dayton to Brussels leads through continued reform, including step-by-step electoral, rule of law, and economic reforms that will benefit all its citizens. We and the EU are pressing for these changes; the Office of the High Representative and EUFOR's Operation ALTHEA are indispensable in these efforts. Recent threats to State-level institutions by Milorad Dodik are dan-

gerous and threaten to undermine Dayton and the European choice and perspective of all Bosnian and Herzegovina citizens. We are vigorously engaging with local actors and our partners to push back on any moves that threaten a return to Bosnia's troubled past, rather than securing its brighter future.

Thanks to generous bipartisan support from Congress, U.S. assistance reflects our standing commitment to the Western Balkans. The United States has provided over \$2.4 billion in assistance to the region in the past decade. In Fiscal Year alone, over \$145 million is helping advance the region on its European path and building resilience to negative external influences. Moscow and Beijing are actively opposed to the region's Western integration, deploying disinformation and exploiting vulnerabilities to divert the countries of the Western Balkans from their democratically chosen paths while gaining an economic and political foothold in Europe. Russia weaponizes its energy supply to coerce politicians, foster corruption, and stunt growth potential. The People's Republic of China is also working to expand its influence in critical infrastructure and through economic coercion. We cannot let them succeed.

The Western Balkans is economically dynamic and full of promise, with its eyes firmly set on joining Europe's single market. Working together, these countries can resolve political challenges and accelerate changes to raise living standards, stem brain drain, and secure the foundation for long-term prosperity. We are committed to helping them secure this integration and to prioritize sustainable investments in quality infrastructure and clean energy, transitioning away from coal and driving regional energy connections. Initiatives like the Common Regional Market, Open Balkans initiatives, and Green Agenda show regional economic integration and cooperation are possible, beneficial, and indispensable for sustained growth.

In closing, allow me to underscore that the Biden Administration has redoubled the U.S. commitment to work with Allies and partners to help the Western Balkans advance the European paths. I look forward to working with Congress and welcome your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Escobar follows:]

Testimony by Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar
House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Hearing on U.S. Engagement in the Balkans
October 28, 2021

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In closing, allow me to underscore that the Biden Administration has redoubled the U.S. commitment to work with Allies and partners to help the Western Balkans advance their respective European paths. I look forward to working with Congress and welcome your questions.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you for your testimony. I'll now recognize members for 5 minutes each, pursuant to House rules. All time yielded is for the purposes of questioning our witness. Because of the virtual format of this hearing, I'll recognize members by Committee seniority, alternating between Democratic and Republican members. If you miss your turn, please let our staff know and we will circle back to you. If you seek recognition, you must unmute your microphone and address the Chair verbally.

I will now start by recognizing myself for 5 minutes. I just want to begin with a very pointed question that I think is practical and essentially, at least as a starting point, because accession of the Western Balkans countries to the European Union is essential. It's essential for U.S. foreign policy and for European Union policy at large. This was, as you mentioned, reaffirmed by the recent joint statement by Secretary Blinken and EU High Representative Borrell. Yet, at a recent EU summit on the Western Balkans, the EU was unable to set a concrete time line for the accession of any Western Balkans countries, and there continues to be sticking points on the part of both of the expiring members in the European Union itself.

Now, despite significant concessions by North Macedonia in their prior dispute with Greece that was resolved with the Prespa Agreement, the initiative of North Macedonia's accession talks remains stalled, and it remains stalled over a language dispute with Bulgaria. As a result of Albania's accession talks being tied to this, neither of the two countries can proceed forward. Albania not only has strong public support for EU membership but also has been a staunch NATO ally.

So my question is what steps specifically can the Biden Administration take and how can they work with the Bulgarians after their upcoming election in November to facilitate and end this agreement, and can Congress at all be helpful in this effort?

Mr. ESCOBAR. Well, Mr. Chairman, thank you for that question. The answer is that we're working with all parties. We're working with the governments of North Macedonia and the governments of Bulgaria to find a positive win-win solution. We're also working with our EU partners who agree with us that this dispute has to be resolved in a relatively short period of time.

We are all in agreement that it is in our strategic interest, in America's strategic interest and Europe's strategic interest, to bring both North Macedonia and Albania into the European Union, and we hope to have this resolved in time for both Albania and North Macedonia to begin negotiations this calendar year.

Mr. KEATING. You mentioned, too, in your testimony about, quote-unquote, the sowing of doubt in the region. So what would be the effects of continued delay in this area? What are you most concerned with?

Mr. ESCOBAR. I'm most concerned about the next generation of the Western Balkans being disillusioned that their country is well into the European Union within a reasonable time period. I'm also concerned that this inability to resolve it could open the door for malign external influences, like China and Russia.

Mr. KEATING. You mentioned China, and I suspect we'll have questions that will be asked in more detail coming forward. But we

also look to Russia in this region, but China is indeed very active. Can you describe some of their activities and the concerns the Administration has about China's activities in the region?

Mr. ESCOBAR. Our main concern with China initially is their economic influence in the region. So China has been one of the leaders in the region advancing non-transparent energy deals, non-transparent infrastructure deals, and there's a level of political influence that comes with that and eventually political coercion. So it's our hope that we can empower our private sector partners to be able to counter China effectively by working with governments, including with our EU partners, to create the opportunities for transparency and a fair playing field for all of our companies. And if we have a fair playing field, we're confident that we can compete, we can out-compete China in the region.

Mr. KEATING. Well, thank you. These will be issues that I think we'll have members that are going to pursue with their questioning. If not, they'll also get a second chance in the second round through writing.

With that, I'm going to yield to Representative Wagner of Missouri for 5 minutes.

Mrs. WAGNER. I thank you, Chairman Keating, for organizing this important hearing, and I want to thank Deputy Assistant Secretary Escobar for his expertise and certainly for his service.

Among the most urgent priorities the United States must pursue in Europe is the promotion of peace, prosperity, and Western integration in the Balkans. Today, deepening divisions in Bosnia, fueled by the reckless succession threats of Bosnian Serb politicians, like Milorad Dodik, pose perhaps the greatest threat to Balkan stability. It worries me tremendously to see Bosnian Serb nationalists, in coordination with the ruthless Putin regime, working to roll back the progress Bosnia has made in the last several years.

I represent the largest Bosnian community outside of Bosnia, and many of my constituents fled to St. Louis during 1992—1995 Bosnian War in which more than 100,000 lost their lives. A majority of those killed were Muslim-majority Bosniaks. I cannot imagine the heartache my constituents must feel when Dodik denies the horrifying genocide committed by Serb troops against Bosniak Muslims at Srebrenica or when he threatens to leave the dissolution of Bosnia. These actions are offensive to those who lost loved ones in the Bosnian War, and they are profoundly dangerous to Bosnia's future as a unified multiethnic State. It is imperative that the United States protect Bosnian sovereignty and territorial integrity as the country navigates these challenges.

Deputy Assistant Secretary Escobar, a leaked cable written by special envoy for the Western Balkans, Matthew Palmer, has been criticized by some Bosniak analysts as outlining a dangerous policy in respect to electoral reform in Bosnia. They suggest Mr. Palmer is working too closely with the nationalist forces who are aiming to further ethnicize the electoral law. What is the Biden Administration's plans to address these concerns, sir?

Mr. ESCOBAR. Well, thank you for that question, Congresswoman. And I want to say to begin with that I know many of the communities that have resettled in your district, they are very,

very loyal and patriotic Americans and I welcome their support in everything that we do in the Balkans.

With regard to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Dayton Peace Agreement is the basis of our policy there. That agreement has managed to keep the peace for over 25 years, and that agreement reinforces the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. And we see Bosnia and Herzegovina as succeeding only as a multiethnic-inclusive and democratic country.

I agree with you that efforts to unilaterally withdraw by any entity, to unilaterally withdraw from central institutions is dangerous and reckless. We're working with our European partners, with NATO, with the EUFOR, and with the Office of the High Representative to ensure that none of this comes to pass. I personally will be traveling to the region in November to reinforce that message. The counselor to the Secretary of State will follow shortly afterwards. But in the meantime, we have several people who are engaged on this on a day-to-day basis, including four full-time senior foreign service officers in-country at any given time.

And I do want to emphasize that Matthew Palmer, who is staying on to be the representative, the person who is being sent by the Secretary to explore electoral reforms, the leaked cable actually was a briefing paper that we gave widely to the international community to consider some points about important reforms that could be made, not to further ethnicize the country but to create greater inclusion for the country and to allow the country to move the electoral process from one that creates obstacles and obstruction to one that allows Bosnia and Herzegovina to achieve greater political consensus and move forward in its European aspirations.

Mrs. WAGNER. Well, Dodik and his Serb and Russian allies are seeking the end of the Office of the High Representative, an independent body caste with ensuring implementation of the peace agreement. They have called for the succession of the Serb majority, Srpska I should say, and boycotted by institutions and set up governing bodies to support those of the central government.

Deputy Assistant Secretary Escobar, Dodik is under U.S. sanctions for obstructing the Dayton Agreement. Why has the EU not sanctioned him, as well; and is the United States pushing the EU to hold Dodik accountable? And I'm out of time, so I'd ask you for an expedited answer, please.

Mr. ESCOBAR. Yes. Yes, we are working with Europeans to make sure that there are consequences to any illegal or any destabilizing action, and I look forward to briefing you again after my return from Bosnia.

Mrs. WAGNER. Well, I appreciate that very, very much, and I'm sure the Committee and the Chairman and certainly our staff would welcome a briefing. And certainly my Bosnian community in St. Louis would be grateful, and I'm glad that you're going.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your indulgence, and I yield back.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Representative. And we will indeed look forward to hearing from you on your return. Thank you for taking the time to be on the ground and your personal involvement in this. That's so important. And as a result of those experiences,

we would ask you to join the Committee in a briefing going forward when you return on what you've seen on the ground.

With that, I'm going to recognize for questions for 5 minutes Representative Wild from Pennsylvania.

Ms. WILD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and welcome, Mr. Escobar. I'm happy to meet you. Your sister is one of my favorite colleagues, I have to say. I do not mean to pander, but she is. So I'm happy to meet you.

To the point, around 400,000 Bosnians or about 12 percent of the population cannot run for parliament or the presidency because of their religion, ethnicity, or where they live. This includes Jews, Roma, and other minority groups not considered among the three constituent peoples identified in the constitution. And because of these provisions, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2009 that the Bosnian constitution violated the European Convention on Human Rights. Despite this ruling, the constitution has not changed. In its opinion on Bosnia's and Herzegovina's application for membership to the EU, the European Commission specifically cited this case and stated significant incremental reforms are, therefore, needed to ensure that all systems can effectively exercise their political rights in order to accept the country into the EU.

How can the Administration work more effectively with our European counterparts to encourage these reforms?

Mr. ESCOBAR. Thank you for that question. In fact, you are correct, and that is the goal of the limited electoral reform that Matt Palmer is working on is to make the electoral law compliant with that ruling. We agree with the ruling, and we do agree that Bosnia and Herzegovina have to make all the reforms, including the limited constitutional reforms necessary to make it compliant with the European Union's requirements.

Additionally, this is not the only obstacle to Bosnia's and Herzegovina's EU aspirations. There are significant questions on rule of law and other issues, and we are working very closely with our European partners in making sure that they can meet those requirements. That is the basis of the Office of the High Representative's 5+2 Agenda, and, as we work through them, hopefully with a sense of urgency, we expect Bosnia will accept those recommendations for reform.

Ms. WILD. Thank you. And switching gears, in October 2020, Albania hosted the first ever Balkans Forum Against Anti-Semitism to combat anti-Jewish prejudice in the region. The Albanian prime minister called anti-Semitism a threat against our own civilization. How can we in the United States incentivize more allies and partners in the region to take concrete steps against the rising threats of anti-Semitism, racism, and ethnonationalist violence?

Mr. ESCOBAR. Well, thank you. I agree with you. We need to take important steps to address this. The Department has a Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues and anti-Semitism, and that envoy makes regular visits to the region, to all of Europe, to encourage countries to appoint people to similar positions. But at the same time we make it a regular part of our engagement with governments in the region, including with Serbia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Croatia and Albania, among others. So we hope that we have at least raised the awareness and raised our concerns to the gov-

ernment, and I would say that those discussions have yielded significant progress in the cases where I have personally been involved.

Ms. WILD. So let me ask you, I know that the region may be susceptible to anti-Semitism precisely because of its history of inter-ethnic prejudice and violence, but do you see opportunities to display this tragic history and the progress that has been made as a case study for why we need to combat these trends, not just in the Balkans but also in Europe more broadly and around the world?

Mr. ESCOBAR. I do. I definitely do think there's opportunities for that. And based on my interactions with regional leaders, I would say that that dialog would be a welcome one.

Ms. WILD. Thank you very much. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. KEATING. Important questions. And I now recognize Representative Mast from Florida for 5 minutes. I see that Representative Mast isn't on the screen at the moment, so I'll recognize Representative Meuser from Pennsylvania for 5 minutes.

Mr. MEUSER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you to the ranking member. I appreciate you putting all this together. Secretary Escobar, thank you very much.

There are concerning reports about the Serbian Co-President Dodik's activities undermine and dismantle Bosnia's central government. After calling for the succession of the Republika Srpska for many years, Dodik is now setting up separate Serb governing bodies and vowing to create his own Bosnian Serb army. He most recently created a separate drug enforcement agency, which many say is a preview to separate law enforcement and other key governmental agencies. He's doing all this with the apparent support of the Russian government that seeks to destabilize Bosnia's central government.

So, Secretary Escobar, how is the U.S. countering Dodik's efforts to undermine the Bosnian central government?

Mr. ESCOBAR. Well, I agree with you that these moves to withdraw from the central institutions are both illegal and destabilizing. So we have called on leaders across the spectrum in Bosnia and Herzegovina not to match him in his rhetoric and not to escalate the situation.

So I personally have made a series of phone calls to leaders. I will be traveling to the region later this month. We've worked with our European partners to do the same. We have made joint statements in support of Bosnia's territorial integrity, and we will continue to support the continued international presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including support for the Office of the High Representative and support for EUFOR's ALTHEA mission. But beyond that, we have other tools, including sanctions, that we are prepared to use in order to limit any further challenges to Bosnia's territorial integrity.

Mr. MEUSER. Thanks for that answer. Yes, I did have the occasion to speak with a foreign minister recently, very, very concerned about matters. And certainly your long history there, knowing the ground, knowing the field, I'm sure will be enormously helpful because it seems like a very, very precarious situation.

Mr. ESCOBAR. Congressman, with very, very few exceptions, Dodik has very little support for what he's doing, including very little public support, and I want to capitalize on that.

Mr. MEUSER. Yes. All right. That's excellent to hear. OK. So Russia has cultivated dependence and exerting their type of influence, which is usually malign. It's exacerbating discord in Bosnia, derailing Balkans countries, NATO bids—that's something that, of course, is of great interest to many—and be using Serbia as a regional intelligence hub; and, yet, the region depends very much on Russian natural gas.

So what are you and the Biden Administration working to counter Russia's malign influence in the region and perhaps decrease their dependence on Russian energy?

Mr. ESCOBAR. Well, we have been working with governments in the region to create regional energy connections that will involve LNG terminals throughout the region. We're working very closely with various governments to increase their capacity for renewable energy. And from a political perspective, we work very closely with them to help them identify this malign influence and counter it. So I am pleased to report that several countries in the region have already entered into legally binding contractual obligations to diversify from Russian natural gas in the near future.

Mr. MEUSER. Well, that sounds encouraging. Terrific. Now, just on to China. Various conversations I've had with citizens of Bosnia real concerned about the investments being made from China and the leverage being used. The State Department, I'm sure, recognize this and working to provide an alternative to China's very often coercive form of diplomacy in the Balkans?

Mr. ESCOBAR. Yes. So I'll start with the very beginning. You know, the economic seduction of China in the region is illusory. China does not care about environmental concerns, labor rights, or transparency. But more and more, as these countries close chapters to join the European Union, they have to care about those issues. And as they care about those issues, they see more and more that Western companies are the answer to their infrastructure development, not China.

So we'll continue that pressure. But as we do so, we're working very closely with our private sector partners to identify the advantages of American and European investment in the region.

Mr. MEUSER. Thank you for your strong answers, and I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Representative. The Chair now recognizes Representative Titus from Nevada for 5 minutes.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just a followup of the previous question. You mentioned some of the countries are joining in agreements on natural gas. I know there's one that's set to start in July 2022 that involves Greece and Azerbaijan and Bulgaria, IGB I think. That seems to be on track, but it could supply natural gas to other countries, as well. Do you see any movement in that direction, or what could we do to help to expand that?

Mr. ESCOBAR. Well, thank you for that question. And, yes, your engagement is always welcome. I would say that that is not the only initiative underway to diversify the energy supply in the Western Balkans. The liquid natural gas terminal in Krk, Croatia,

is already supplying half of Croatia's gas needs and could be set to expand to other countries soon.

There are other initiatives, including an LNG terminal in Greece that is looking to expand northward and could be and will effectively challenge Russia's stranglehold on the region in the southern part of the Western Balkans on gas. And beyond that, we are looking with our private sector partners to develop wind farms, hydropower, and solar fields to help reduce their dependence on Russian natural gas.

Ms. TITUS. That's good, that's good news. You know, speaking of Russia, talk about their influence, we also know that they are meddling in elections there, not just in the U.S. against Hillary Clinton. But we saw Russian interference in the election with North Macedonia's name change to try to slow down that process of Macedonia joining the EU. They weren't successful, but they are certainly there. Do you see evidence of that sort of thing anywhere else?

Mr. ESCOBAR. We do. Russia has a very substantial disinformation and propaganda network, and it operates very, very actively in the Western Balkans. We are working very closely with our EU partners, with NATO, to help them identify those threats to their electoral space, to their media space. And there is a significant Department of State effort to provide them with greater resiliency to their nets and to their media space through anti-corruption drives, through our Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, through USAID, and, again, through our partnership with NATO.

Ms. TITUS. You know, the President expanded or continued the sanctions that had been opposed earlier there in the Balkans. I think they were put in place as far back as 2001. Has there been any assessment if these sanctions are really working? That always seems to be our go-to position, impose sanctions. We know they really haven't worked in Russia. Are they working in the Balkans? Have you looked at that? Should we try something else?

Mr. ESCOBAR. Well, I would say the sanctions are an important tool to have. They're not the sole answer to the democratic challenges that the region faces, but they are important for us. And I would say that, yes, that sanctions do have an important effect because they are almost always targeted at individuals and not at governments.

So we've had tremendous success in altering the behavior of certain people, and I can attest to the fact that in the late 90's the sanctions and the threat of sanctions were an effective tool in helping us get rid of Milosevic.

Ms. TITUS. You know, speaking of individuals and bad behavior, some of the atrocity crimes from the previous war are still being discussed. They're still very tender areas, especially those who used rape as a tool of war. Where are we in terms of trying to settle those issues so we can be more effective in moving the countries forward?

Mr. ESCOBAR. Well, we were very effective in arresting nearly everybody who was on the list of indicted war criminals put out by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Yugoslavia. I think all of them ended up at some point facing justice.

We also have a residual mechanism that all of the countries of the region have signed on to that requires them to prosecute domestically anybody who has been accused of war crimes, and we continue to work with that residual mechanism in Bosnia, in Serbia, and Kosovo to make sure that those people do not evade justice.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. KEATING. The Chair now recognizes Representative Tenney from New York for 5 minutes.

Ms. TENNEY. Thank you, Chairman Keating and Ranking Member. And thank you to our witness today. Really interested in this region of the world since I served as the only American employed by the former Yugoslav Consulate during the 80's and also during the Olympics in Sarajevo. So I spent a lot of time and a lot of years traveling to this region of the world, and this is a really timely meeting. So, again, I thank the Chairman for doing this, and we're seeing, you know, real strategic competition dramatically in the Western Balkans becoming a place with renewed geopolitical focus for Russia, as well as China. And right now I think we need to continue our efforts in the Western Balkans in order to counter this Russian influence and bring greater stability to the region in the Balkans, especially the scale and depth of the U.S.-European cooperation demonstrates the ways in which the Transatlantic relationship helps address real issues and build stronger and long-term bulwarks against this Chinese and Russian influence, which I hear about all the time from my friends formerly of the Consulate and in other parts of the former Yugoslavia.

My first question, in dealing with Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia, they are engaged in a regional economic process called the Open Balkans. I believe greater regional economic integration could make the Western Balkans more interconnected and prosperous. Does the State Department support the Open Balkans initiative?

Mr. ESCOBAR. We support all initiatives that bring the countries closer together economically. We believe that closer economic cooperation is not only happening, but it will continue to happen.

The leaders of the three countries that have explored the Open Balkans initiative have assured us that it is open to all six countries of the Western Balkans, and we believe them. In fact, it cannot succeed without the other three. This Open Balkans initiative also mirrors something under the Berlin process called the common regional market.

So we think that they are complementary. We think that anything that brings the countries closer together will create confidence among the people, will create opportunities for political movement on some of the issues. So, yes, we support all efforts to bring the countries closer together economically.

And by the way, should this happen, should we get a regional market, a free market among six countries of 20 million people and a \$125 billion economy with growth rates upwards of 6 or 7 percent, it would be a very, very attractive market for American companies. So we want to encourage all of that, and we want to encourage American investment in the region, as well.

Ms. TENNEY. Thank you. Yes, especially countering anything that the Russians are doing. Let me ask you is the Administration doing anything to ensure that Montenegro sticks to its Euro-Atlantic path and upholds its obligations to NATO? And what would be the consequences for these efforts since the pro-Russian Democratic Front directly participates in government? Is that something that you guys are tracking?

Mr. ESCOBAR. Yes, we are tracking that very, very closely. In fact, last week, we had a series of Montenegro delegations visit Washington where we pressed them on maintaining not only their European orientation but upholding their NATO commitments. At every meeting with every interlocutor we got the commitments that their government will abide by that arrangement.

Additionally, we raised with them our concerns about the Democratic Front, and they have recognized that every member of the coalition will sign on to continued NATO membership, continued recognition of Kosovo, and a continued path to Europe, and we have gotten assurances that that will not change. So we're watching very closely. And as I travel to the region, immediately after my visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina, I am traveling to Montenegro by road to have more discussions with the government to ensure that this continues to be the case.

Ms. TENNEY. OK. That sounds like a lot of progress is at least being made. In terms of Montenegro's security and intelligence services, are we actively monitoring that and are we able to scrutinize some of these key appointments and keeping track of what's happening with the DF and their participation in the government?

Mr. ESCOBAR. Yes, the government has given us full transparency about their moves within the government. They have previewed their appointments, and they continue to meet their obligations. I would say that Montenegro is still a very, very close ally and a very good friend.

Ms. TENNEY. I have got so many questions for you. I do not know how much time I have; I do not see it on my screen there. But just a quick question on Serbia. They have been seeking to procure U.S. original military equipment for peacekeeping operations. They are obviously a leading European contributor on a per capita basis to peacekeeping around the world. But while Serbia isn't a member of NATO, Serbia's use of U.S. origin military equipment would increase in interoperability between the Serbian military and the United States and our allies. Do we support procurement of U.S. military equipment between Serbia and the United States, and what are the concerns you may have on that, obviously with Russian influence in the region?

Mr. ESCOBAR. I would say that our relationship with Russia, sorry, with Serbia is improving at the expense of Russia. We currently have a very strong partnership between the Serbian military and the Ohio National Guard, and every time they do an exercise it displaces a Russian exercise.

So with regard to Serbia's peacekeeping participation, they have worked very closely with us to improve their peacekeeping capacity, and they have most recently signed an agreement to be part of the Multinational Force Observers in Sinai, helping keep the peace between Egypt and Israel. So we welcome that kind of en-

agement by Serbia, and we welcome their efforts to procure American-made equipment in limited cases.

Ms. TENNEY. Great. Thank you. Can I just grab one quick question. On Bulgaria, they have 16 European Court of Human Rights judgments against them for violating human rights and freedom of assembly of the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. What is the Administration doing to make sure Bulgaria is fulfilling its operations as a NATO member in regard to these human rights violations?

Mr. ESCOBAR. Our Ambassador in Sofia is working very closely with her European partners on the ground to make sure that these issues get addressed. The basis of our relationship with our European partners is about values and not just common interests but shared values, and anything that violates that bond is of great concern to us.

Ms. TENNEY. Great. Thank you. I appreciate the questions. I think I'm running out of time but would love to submit questions on Bosnia when we get there, too, because I have large Bosnian refugee population, as Representative Wagner does.

But thank you so much. I really appreciate the answers and direct answers to our questions. Thank you.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you for sharing your experience with us. And the Chair recognizes Representative Brad Schneider for 5 minutes.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And first let me thank the Chairman for your leadership on our resolution we are introducing later today reaffirming the U.S. commitment to global climate cooperation ahead of the COP26 meetings.

Deputy Assistant Secretary Escobar, several things. One, thank you for your time today and sharing your background. I'll echo my colleagues' enthusiastic appreciation of your sister and her role in our thing, so thank you, thank you for that.

I also want to associate myself with my colleague, Representative Wild, as well as her concerns about anti-Semitism in the region. I very much appreciate your response to that.

What I want to focus on is really the issues of poor influence in the region, in particular, as you have already talked about to some extent, Russia and China, relative to the European Union and the United States. Influence can take many different forms, including political, military, economic, cultural. So I know you touched on some of these things, but can you expand a bit on how Russia and China are trying to exert broader influence in the Western Balkans and really are succeeding, areas of concern or perhaps they're less successful? But then, most importantly, I'd love your thoughts on how the U.S. with our European allies is pushing back, where we are successful, where we need to perhaps change our approach.

Mr. ESCOBAR. That's a very good question. Thank you, Representative. We are very concerned about Chinese and Russian malign influence in the region, and they are not, they do not manifest themselves in the same way.

So I'll start with Russia. Russia has very little to offer the region. They provide almost no investment. They provide no humanitarian assistance, no development assistance. And so what they have to offer is division and ethnic tension, and they work that as hard as they possibly can as a way of undermining the multiethnic and

democratic nature of tendencies of some of these countries. So we work politically in ways to make those countries continue on their path, to make them aware of the dangers of not countering this kind of rhetoric and allowing it to operate in their media space, in their virtual space, and in their political space.

The answer to this one, and it will be the same answer to the question of China, as well, is to anchor these countries in the community of Western democratic nations through European Union membership. That's why accession is so important.

With regard to China, China operates most effectively in the economic sphere. They provide non-transparent loans, often with conditions that surprise the countries later. They operate in ways that over-promise and under-fulfill their commercial commitments. And they frequently do so by pressing these contracts become State secrets, so even the taxpayers and the voters and citizens of these countries do not understand the nature of Chinese investment. So, again, anchoring these countries in the European Union where they have legally binding obligations to transparency, open tenders, freedom of information to their citizens, is absolutely crucial.

In the meantime, I do believe that American companies are the best in the world and they can out-compete China anywhere anytime on the basis of quality, customer support, and technology. So it is our hope that we can help find ways to foster American investment in the region, which is one of the reasons why this common regional market would make it an attractive target for American companies.

So, ultimately, it is this joining this broad open market of Europe with its standards, its legislative framework, and its regulatory structure that will help us combat Chinese economic influence.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Great. Thank you. And with my last few seconds here, just building on that, much of it depends on the European Union and other countries taking action. Are there things we can do in Congress to help promote and support American companies doing business in the region, strengthening economic ties and, at the same time, working to strengthen the economic ties between the countries that make up the Balkans?

Mr. ESCOBAR. Yes. I would say that high-level attention is always welcome. Support for our assistance programs to make these countries more capable of handling transparency, legal reforms, regulatory reforms is important, and engagement with your European counterparts expressing how important it is that they get engaged in the Balkans, as well, is crucial to this process.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Great. Thank you. I'm over time, Chairman. I appreciate the extra time, and I yield back. Mr. Chairman, you're on mute.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you for bringing up the economic questions that we have. The Chair recognizes Representative Pfluger from Texas for 5 minutes.

Mr. PFLUGER. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate your leadership on this important topic here. And, Mr. Secretary, thank you for joining us today. I think a lot of my questions are going to be focused around kind of a similar trend that you've seen here, and really it gets to the heart of our influence versus Russian influence, and I want to focus on energy specifically. I mean, there's a

massive energy crisis going on right now in Europe, you know. To put this in context, I see prices in Western Europe at \$25 an Mcf for natural gas, which is five times that of the United States. I think we're in for a rough winter. I think we'll see some challenges there. And the most concerning piece of this is that we see Putin very willing to weaponize energy as a tool of diplomacy, if you want to call it diplomacy, I'll put some air quotes over that, but as a tool because it's very concerning with the Nord Stream pipeline. You know, you can go through the Baltic countries all the way down into the Balkans, and everyone is very concerned about this.

So I just kind of wanted to get your, you know, have you seen examples of the Putin regime attempting to weaponize dependence in the Western Balkans area on Russian energy so far?

Mr. ESCOBAR. Absolutely. Every energy deal that Putin enters into comes with political requirements. In some cases, it is pressure for countries not to enter into required sanctions against Russia and Russian entities, Russian individuals. In other cases, it is to try to garner support for their moves in the United Nations to counter our agenda. And in many cases, it is to isolate our efforts in moving these countries closer to Europe.

So, yes, there's a tremendous amount of coercion that goes on, and one of the main reasons why we are seeking these countries to look for ways to diversify their energy, and it will happen. And the question is how fast we can make it happen.

So we've been working very, very closely with our partners in the region to get liquid natural gas and renewables online as quickly as possible. And I'm hopeful that in the next 5 years a lot of those investigations and a lot of those deals will bear fruit.

Mr. PFLUGER. Well, we are hopeful, as well. And I think, you know, yesterday we had a hearing with Development Finance Corp and some others, and one of the things that strikes me right now is that that's a great tool for us to use with the Western business values and whether it is in Greece or whether it is in Serbia or whether it is in any of these countries, we want to make sure that the DFC continues with their commitment, for instance to open an office in Belgrade or to do the things that Congress has specifically instructed them to do.

So can you kind of talk to the benefits, if they were, you know, when this happens because it is something that I believe will help diversify, talk to the benefits of what the DFC can be doing and what they should be doing with regard to energy specifically in this region?

Mr. ESCOBAR. I share your enthusiasm for the opportunities that DFC offers the region, and I can say that DFC has offered some tools, including in Serbia, that were incredibly important in entrepreneurial development and women's issues. So I welcome their continued engagement. But to be honest, our biggest challenge in facing China is financing of major infrastructure. And if there are ways that DFC can find to legally support some of these infrastructure deals, it will go a long way because some of these multibillion dollar investments are a big deal to small countries, so they need to have the financing in place before they can agree to deals, and that is where China has an advantage over our companies in that

China can come in and offer the deal and the financing at the same time.

Now, as I said before, the financing often is not transparent and not open to scrutiny by the public. But we, I am hopeful that we can work with DFC to find opportunities to counter that.

Mr. PFLUGER. Well, and, Secretary Escobar, thank you so much for that. I think it is so important that we look for these, whether it is the DFC or other mechanisms, these countries are going to fill their energy needs in one way or another. And if they can diversify, that's great; but the No. 1 thing is they are going to make sure that they have energy and we do not want that to be at the expense of a bad deal politically or with strings attached or something that leads to an even more desperate situation. And so we want to be a part of the solution. We welcome the inputs and the avenues that we can explore, but I am very passionate about making sure, especially knowing that Nord Stream does have a lot of political implications with it, negative connotations, that we provide these countries with another alternative and that we can move in the direction of, you know, pro-Western value business models that allow them to have energy and also that create good partners and, in some cases, allies for us.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back. And thank you, Secretary, for being here today.

Mr. ESCOBAR. Thank you.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you very much, Representative. Both the Representative Tenney and myself, we'd like to take a few minutes for a second round of questions limited to 3 minutes a piece. I thank Mr. Escobar for his flexibility in doing this.

I will just recognize myself quickly for an area that I just wanted to emphasize. The Biden Administration and your office, how are you working with Serbia and Kosovo, as well as our EU partners, to help facilitate the EU-led dialog? And have the recent flare-ups impacted these negotiations or broadened negotiations?

Mr. ESCOBAR. Well, the most important thing is, from our perspective, the dialog is the forum in which a solution is going to be found. So we strongly support Special Rep Lajcak's efforts to move this dialog forward.

So from our perspective and the perspective of our major allies, our hope is that we can help the countries implement the agreements that they've already made, abide by the agreements that they've already committed to, and help them create the institutions or implement the political resolutions effectively. And in the meantime, while we are not part of the dialog and we are not part of the negotiating process, we still work very closely with Mr. Lajcak in encouraging the parties to be flexible, pragmatic, and solution-oriented.

And the most recent flare-up, I think, showed the opportunities that we have in working together because what it ended up doing is proving that the dialog does work as a forum for resolving problems. And I look forward to Mr. Lajcak's continued aggressive work in moving to more challenging issues.

Mr. KEATING. Well, thank you. You know, I think that your personal involvement, the attention of the Secretary, is important to reinforce our beliefs and our interests in the area. And I think to-

day's hearing also, besides the discussion of sanctions, it also went into the importance of our economic involvement out of the EU and the U.S. in the area in energy and other economic activities. I think that will strengthen our hand diplomatically in shaping resolution to so many of these conflicts.

I will now recognize Representative Tenney for 3 minutes.

Ms. TENNEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just want to just clarify something, Mr. Escobar. On the DFC presence in Belgrade and supporting the private investments in the Western Balkans and Aegean, is that something, are we committed to that still and will we be putting a person in place there? I didn't catch the precise answer to that. Is the reason we do not have someone because we're deciding whether to do it, to put someone there, or because we just do not have the right person to go there?

Mr. ESCOBAR. Congresswoman, I do not know what the internal deliberations of DFC are. I can only say that the Department of State welcomes DFC's presence in the Western Balkans. We think DFC has a lot of tools that will make an enormous difference, and we are engaging with DFC and looking for ways that they can employ the entire array of their tools to address some of the issues that we're facing.

Ms. TENNEY. Oh, great. Thank you. I just want to get to another question because you said that expanded U.S. sanctions regime for the Western Balkans could be used very aggressively to tackle the widespread corruption in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Can you explain in more detail how the Biden Administration plans to use these expanded authorities, and has the threat of sanctions been used to bring Bosnia's and Herzegovina's different parties to the table on election reform? And I know this comes down to a lot of people not understanding some of the regional issues where Bosnia and Croatia are so close to each other. Can you answer that? And then if there is a way that we can have Croatia get their representation somehow. I know that there's naturalization of a lot of Bosnians, and Bosniaks are Croatian nationals and there are also Croatians who are Bosnians, so, obviously, this is probably a remnant of the old Yugoslavia. But can you just, what is the sanction regime and how are we going to resolve this sort of election issue that's sort of a—

Mr. ESCOBAR. Well, I'll start with the easy answer first. Croatia is a signatory to Dayton, and they have a legitimate interest in what happens in Bosnia and Herzegovina. And for that reason, Matt Palmer sought consultations before he traveled down to Sarajevo, so we are working with our Croatian partners in making sure that they can support and implement their end of their requirements.

With regard to sanctions, the new expanded authorities have not been used yet, but we intend to use them very aggressively. And they can be used both against entities and individuals, but they're more effective when they're used against individuals. So in my personal experience in Balkans, sanctions have been very, very useful in getting either unhelpful actors to get out of the political space or to isolate them or to change their behavior. So it is our intent to use them.

Ms. TENNEY. Quick question. Would you support a Dayton 2, to reconsider a new version, as Representative Turner introduces each year? Would that be something you'd support?

Mr. ESCOBAR. I do not. I mean, the Dayton Peace Agreement has been successful in keeping the peace for over 25 years, and I believe that with limited constitutional reform, with step-by-step electoral and judicial reforms, we can get to a more functional place in Bosnia.

Ms. TENNEY. Great. Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate the extra questions and your time. Thanks so much, Mr. Chairman. I'm grateful.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you very much. As you can see, Mr. Escobar, there's been great bipartisan interest in the region. I think that's very important to underscore from Congress. We will very much appreciate a followup when you're back in terms of what our greater role could be. There are many instances—I think one of the things on the ground if you could come back to would be the issue of, you know, some of our developmental funding is limited to areas where the per capita income, it is geared to lower per capita income. And I think that inhibits, you know, when it is fairly modernized in this region, some of those moneys from being directed there, as important as they are for democratic initiatives. So I think that is important.

And another thing coming back, I'm just intrigued that, as China becomes more and more active in that area, Russia obviously will look at this as some type of intrusion on an area they consider to have greater influence on. So I also, as a followup, would be very curious as to what you are finding out with that.

So I want to thank you for your time. I want to thank all the members on a very difficult day where we had to do some shifting, but we did not want to delay this hearing. The timing of this is important, the issue is important. This is an issue when our subcommittee was forming early in this congress, we wanted to make sure we had a hearing on the Western Balkans and emphasize this. I think it is very important, so I appreciate your participation and look forward to a successful trip and to come back and further brief this Committee on what you see on the ground.

Mr. ESCOBAR. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. KEATING. So with that, members of the Committee will have 5 days to submit statements, extraneous materials and questions for the record subject to the length limitation that are there in the rules.

I want to thank the members again for adjusting around a busy day and for their participation in clearly what was a very timely and important hearing. With that, I will call this hearing adjourned.

[Whereupon, the above-entitled matter went off the record at 12:45 p.m.]

APPENDIX

SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber

William R. Keating (D-MA), Chair

October 28, 2021

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, to be held by the Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber via Cisco WebEx (and available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>):

DATE: Thursday, October 28, 2021
TIME: 10:00 a.m., EDT
SUBJECT: U.S. Engagement in the Western Balkans
WITNESS: Mr. Gabriel Escobar
Deputy Assistant Secretary
Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs
United States Department of State

By Direction of the Chair

To fill out this form online: Either use the tab key to travel through each field or mouse click each line or within blue box. Type in information.

Note: Red boxes with red type will NOT print.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber HEARING

Day Thursday Date 10/28/2021 Room Cisco Webex

Starting Time 11:31 Ending Time 12:45

Recesses (___ to ___) (___ to ___)

Presiding Member(s)
William R. Keating

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session
Executive (closed) Session
Televised

Electronically Recorded (taped)
Stenographic Record

To select a box, mouse click it, or tab to it and use the enter key to select. Another click on the same box will deselect it.

TITLE OF HEARING:
U.S. Engagement in the Western Balkans

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:
See Attached

NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: (Mark with an * if they are not members of full committee.)

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes No
(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: (List any statements submitted for the record.)
Mr. Gabriel Escobar's Testimony
Representative Jim Costa's QFR for Mr. Gabriel Escobar
Representative Ann Wagner's QFR for Mr. Gabriel Escobar
Representative David N. Cicilline's QFR for Mr. Gabriel Escobar

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____
or
TIME ADJOURNED 12:45

Benjamin Cooper
Subcommittee Staff Associate

Clear Form

Note: If listing additional witnesses not included on hearing notice, be sure to include title, agency, etc.

WHEN COMPLETED: Please print for subcommittee staff director's signature and make at least one copy of the signed form. A signed copy is to be included with the hearing/markup transcript when ready for printing along with a copy of the final meeting notice (both will go into the appendix). The signed original, with a copy of the final meeting notice attached, goes to full committee. An electronic copy of this PDF file may be saved to your hearing folder, if desired.

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RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. Jim Costa (#1)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Question 1:

By most accounts EU-led dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo is largely stalled. As we look for ways to maintain and strengthen our critical transatlantic partnership, how does the Biden administration intend to support the EU in these ongoing dialogues?

Answer 1:

While not a party to the talks, the United States has played a consistent role in supporting Serbia and Kosovo to reach an agreement to establish fully normalized relations through a comprehensive and legally binding agreement, which we believe should be centered on mutual recognition. The Department closely coordinates with the European Union (EU) and European partners to advance the EU-facilitated Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia as the mechanism for this effort. We will continue to encourage leaders in Belgrade and Pristina to approach the Dialogue seriously, urgently, and with the necessary creativity and flexibility to reach compromises that improve the lives of citizens in both Serbia and Kosovo.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. Jim Costa (#2)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Question 2:

There are reports of a deteriorating situation when it comes to free elections in some areas of the Balkans, including Serbia. As we look ahead to the Parliamentary and presidential elections next spring, to what extent is the administration concerned about free and fair elections, and how can we work with our EU partners to ensure election security in the region?

Answer 2:

Lack of political pluralism in Serbia remains a concern. The United States continues to encourage a level electoral playing field ahead of April 2022 elections. For instance, opposition political parties should have equal access to appear on television political affairs programs on Radio Television Serbia (RTS) and other state broadcasters. We support the OSCE's planned Election Observation Mission to Serbia to assess election administration, campaign financing, media coverage and oversight, and election day procedures. While we do not take sides in domestic political contests, the United States supports democratic development in Serbia and the right of all citizens to participate in a free and fair electoral process.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. Jim Costa (#3)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Question 3:

How is the U.S. working to counter foreign influence campaigns in the Western Balkans? Have these efforts been successful? What more can be done to ensure Russia, China, and other actors do not gain an even more significant influence in the region?

Answer 3:

The United States and Russia have starkly different visions for the Western Balkans. Moscow actively opposes the region's Euro-Atlantic integration and sows friction, distrust, and inter-ethnic tension. Beijing is actively building infrastructure and investing in strategic industries in the region through opaque grants, loans, and investments; it is also engaging more in the security realm. Both U.S. interests and those of the Western Balkans are best served by cementing democratic norms and rule of law and supporting increased Western investment, while combatting corruption. Our foreign assistance programming supports reforms that advance Euro-Atlantic integration and close down opportunities for malign actors to turn these countries from their chosen path. For example, the United States funds programs in the Western Balkans that increase access to objective information by strengthening independent media and supporting investigative journalism on corruption and foreign influence, including cases tied to Russian interests. In FY 2021, we committed approximately \$45 million in economic growth programming for the region. U.S. technical assistance also supports building investment screening capacity so that governments and businesses can accurately assess and prevent unfavorable deals including those presented by malign actors.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. Ann Wagner (#1)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Question 1:

While I appreciate that the United States expanded its sanctions program for the Western Balkans this past June, I am wondering exactly how the Administration plans to use this tool to respond to Bosnian Serb politicians' provocations. The United States sanctioned Dodik in 2017, but it has not designated anyone under that program since then. Deputy Assistant Secretary Escobar, will the Administration consider sanctioning more of Dodik's inner circle?

Answer 1:

The Department of State, working across the U.S. government, will continue to use all appropriate tools to combat corruption and destabilizing behavior in the Western Balkans and to promote peace and prosperity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including the new Western Balkans sanctions authority (Executive Order 14033) and existing Section 7031c visa restriction authorities.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. Ann Wagner (#2)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Question 2:

Why exactly is the U.S. administration negotiating with Milorad Dodik, the main Russian proxy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who is under US sanctions? What does the current administration expect to achieve by negotiating with the politician who regularly attacks and insults the U.S. embassy in Sarajevo, calls the United States key source of instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, actively blocks Bosnia's NATO aspirations, and is now threatening to dismantle Bosnian central government institutions built with years of U.S. and EU investment of political capital and funds?

Answer 2:

We are concerned about Dodik's actions and have increased our engagement with a wide range of political and civil society leaders to address underlying issues and achieve reforms required for Bosnia and Herzegovina's Euro-Atlantic path and future. Milorad Dodik is under U.S. sanctions. We limit, or engage in, interactions with him appropriately to advance U.S. interests and in accordance with U.S. law. Our message to Dodik and other leaders is clear: de-escalate and return to governance.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. Ann Wagner (#3)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Question 3:

Dodik's secessionist brinkmanship is extremely dangerous and may lead to a serious crisis in Bosnia. What do you assess is the risk of conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina? How would the United States respond to such a conflict? How is the United States working to de-escalate the situation?

Answer 3:

The U.S. is unequivocally committed to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Actions that undermine the Dayton Peace Accords are unacceptable and increase the risk of instability and violence. We have made clear publicly and privately to BiH's leaders the need for de-escalation and a return to governance. Destabilizing behavior will come with consequences.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. Ann Wagner (#4)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Question 4:

The U.S. approach towards electoral reform legislation in Bosnia and Herzegovina must affirm equality for all ethnic groups and protect the rights of voting-age Bosnians who do not vote for one of the three nationalist parties. These voters account for nearly 60% of the voting population. I am worried, however, that the United States may be overly concerned with placating nationalist groups. Can you explain why a leaked policy document written by Special Envoy Palmer dismissed a civic-state option as “not realistic?”

Answer 4:

Electoral and limited constitutional reforms are required to improve election integrity and implement key European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and Bosnian Constitutional Court rulings. These measures will bring Bosnia and Herzegovina in line with European standards and further its progress on its European Union path. Election integrity measures will not just benefit all citizens, they also meet a key demand of civic (non-nationalist) parties. Multiple parties must support the deal to secure the required votes in Parliament; all groups need to compromise. The United States, along with our EU partners, continues to press with key interlocutors from all political parties our concerns and urge solutions that work for all, not cater to any one interest group.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. Ann Wagner (#5)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Question 5:

How will you ensure that any electoral reforms honor the constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina and reflect relevant decisions of the Bosnian Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights?

Answer 5:

The Department of State is working alongside our partners from the European Union to ensure any deal on electoral and limited constitutional reform addresses European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and Bosnia and Herzegovina's Constitutional Court rulings. Electoral law specialists and other legal representatives from the Venice Commission continue reviews on proposed legislation to ensure it meets existing best practices and is in accordance with European standards.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. Ann Wagner (#6)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Question 6:

As Bosnia works toward NATO accession, how is the United States encouraging Bosnia to increase its defense spending?

Answer 6:

The United States and NATO Headquarters Sarajevo—led by a U.S. commander—consistently message the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) on the importance of implementing its 2016 Defense Review and meeting NATO standards. We also liaise with the government’s Ministry of Defense and its Commission for Cooperation with NATO. Political gridlock in state-level institutions impedes BiH’s progress. We continue to press within the defense and parliamentary communities for defense reforms and the greater funding necessary to achieve them.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. David N. Cicilline (#1)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

European Union Accession:

DAS Escobar, as you know, North Macedonia has made a number of concessions in its desire to join the European Union, including acquiescing on the name of the country itself. As you also know, the people of Albania regularly express strong support for joining the EU. However, a number of challenges have prevented the opening of accession chapters.

Question 1:

What is the status of Bulgaria's challenge to North Macedonian and Albanian accession to the EU?

Answer 1:

The United States strongly supports the EU holding Intergovernmental Conferences (IGC) with both North Macedonia and Albania as soon as possible. Bulgaria has sustained its block on accession talks for North Macedonia, which has impacted Albania, as it is coupled with North Macedonia in the process and cannot move forward with an IGC until Bulgaria lifts its block. North Macedonia and Albania have each enacted significant reforms and deserve to move ahead on their EU accession paths. Their new governments have indicated willingness to work to resolve the bilateral dispute; this should be done outside the EU accession process.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. David N. Cicilline (#2)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Question 2:

French President Emmanuel Macron has, in the past, expressed a degree of “enlargement fatigue.” Has President Macron’s view evolved? How can the U.S. work with traditional allies like France to advance support for EU enlargement?

Answer 2:

The United States will continue to work with France and other EU Member States in support of EU enlargement. In June, French President Emmanuel Macron reaffirmed France’s commitment in supporting EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. We expect France to use its Presidency of the Council of the EU to prioritize discussions around EU enlargement and will engage with France and the EU on that basis.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. David N. Cicilline (#3)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Question 3:

How can we partner with our European allies to ensure that the prospect of enlargement is enough to generate genuine reforms and not hollow acts designed only to satisfy bare minimum requirements?

Answer 3:

The United States will continue to work with the EU and EU Member States to ensure EU accession remains open for all countries in the Western Balkans. The EU enlargement process has a proven track record of promoting peace, stability, and prosperity through the region. North Macedonia and Albania have made significant progress on the hard work of reforms and deserve to move forward on their EU paths. The U.S. will continue to advocate for the EU holding Intergovernmental Conferences with North Macedonia and Albania as soon as possible.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. David N. Cicilline (#4)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Question 4:

To what degree is Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's advocacy for Serbian accession problematic for that prospect? Is their concern that Orban wants another illiberal partner inside the EU?

Answer 4:

Hungary has long supported EU enlargement to neighboring Western Balkans; it works to facilitate cross-border ties to ethnic Hungarians in Serbia, expand Hungarian exports, deepen political stability in the region, and push the EU's external border outward. Since formally opening EU accession negotiations in 2014, Serbia has made significant progress toward meeting the necessary conditions. But Serbia has more to do, particularly in areas such as fighting corruption, improving the rule of law, strengthening democratic institutions and civil society, and aligning its foreign policy with the EU. We will continue to support Serbia in these efforts.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. David N. Cicilline (#5)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

LGBTQI+ Rights:

The rights and safety of the region's LGBTQI+ population remains a concern despite some progress.

Question 5:

Can you elaborate on how the region can better advance LGBTQI+ rights and protections? How crucial is EU accession to strengthening those rights and protections?

Answer 5:

The United States recognizes the important strides several countries in the Western Balkans have taken to significantly improve human rights protections for LGBTQI+ persons. We will continue our work to advance concrete gains in human rights, dignity, and inclusion by holding regular consultations with local civil society organizations, raising concerns with governments both publicly and privately, and coordinating efforts with like-minded countries to encourage equal protections under the law for LGBTQI+ persons. The EU accession process provides a solid framework to ensure respect for fundamental rights. The European Commission consistently references LGBTI issues in its annual progress reports on enlargement.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. David N. Cicilline (#6)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Question 6:

Can you elaborate on Montenegro's success at advancing legal rights for LGBTQI+ persons and how that framework could conceivably serve as a model to neighboring states?

Answer 6:

In July 2020, Montenegro became the first non-EU Balkan country to legalize same-sex civil partnerships, and it has several laws unique to the region that protect the rights and identity status of LGBTQI+ persons. These include its Law on Gender Equality (2007), which prohibits discrimination based on sex, including the category "persons of different gender identities," and its Law on Anti-Discrimination (2010), the first such law in the region to recognize intersex characteristics. Aspects of Montenegro's LGBTQI+ framework that could serve as a useful regional model include the gradual inclusion of LGBTQI+ elements across multiple laws as well as a vibrant, well-organized civil society that champions LGBTQI+ rights.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. David N. Cicilline (#7)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

The Rule of Law and Crime:

Organized crime, corruption, and the unequal application of the law in some Western Balkans states remain severe obstacles to progress in those states. A violent drug war amongst rival factions in Montenegro, for example, has spilled across borders and has exacerbated issues of corruption in multiple states.

Question 7:

How can the United States better engage regional partners to help them contain organized crime in the region?

Answer 7:

The United States remains heavily engaged with Western Balkans countries to combat corruption and organized crime, enhance law enforcement capacities, and strengthen justice sector institutions grounded in democratic norms. We provide assistance to build the capacity of law enforcement and justice sector institutions in the Western Balkans to combat organized criminal groups, who are major players in the trafficking of narcotics, people, weapons and other contraband in Europe and beyond. We are committed to promoting accountability and combating impunity under the June 2021 Executive Order (E.O.) that modernizes the Western Balkans sanctions regime.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. David N. Cicilline (#8)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Question 8:

Are some governments in the region, in your opinion, too close to organized crime figures? Reports in the region go so far as to say some have been “captured” by elites that act in concert with organized crime figures. Can you elaborate on this?

Answer 8:

The Western Balkans region continues to grapple with rule of law challenges, weak democratic institutions, and the effects of prolonged ethno-nationalist political infighting, which provide inroads for malign foreign influence and enable endemic corruption and organized crime. To counter these activities, we support civic activism to advocate for the rule of law, meaningful reform progress in the fight against corruption, regionally focused trainings to strengthen capabilities to fight organized crime, independent journalism, and free and fair elections with the chance of real, democratic change. We will also continue to use authorities under E.O. 14033 to promote accountability for actors across the region and globally.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. David N. Cicilline (#9)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Question 9:

How can the United States better engage with partners in the region to ensure that the judiciary in each state is acting independently and is free from being forced to act because of political pressure from self-serving elites?

Answer 9:

In June 2021, President Biden declared countering corruption “a core United States national security interest.” Countering corruption is fundamentally about preserving and strengthening democracy. When political leaders steal from their country’s citizens or flout the rule of law and an independent judiciary, economic growth slows, inequality widens, equitable access to services is undercut, markets are distorted, and trust in government plummets. The United States wholeheartedly supports reforms to strengthen the region’s democratic institutions, increasing their transparency and accountability. We will also continue to use appropriate authorities under E.O. 14033 to promote accountability for actors across the region and globally.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. David N. Cicilline (#10)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

The Environment:

Cities in the region, including Belgrade, Sarajevo, and Tuzla, are some of the world's most polluted.

Question 10:

How responsible are Chinese and Russian enterprises responsible for the dramatic increase in air pollution in the region?

Answer 10:

The People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Russian Federation are enablers of the region's lax enforcement of low environmental standards. PRC-affiliate-enterprises have prolonged the region's dependence on coal through financing and construction of coal-fired thermal power plants in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro. Russian refineries are the primary supplier of low-quality gasoline to the region, which is one of the major contributors to air pollution.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. David N. Cicilline (#11)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Question 11:

What can the United States do to assist the region in combating deadly air pollution?

Answer 11:

The Western Balkans region generates approximately 70 percent of its electricity from inefficient Yugoslav-era coal-fired power plants. The United States is working closely with partners in the region to diversify its energy sources away from coal towards a substantial increase in renewables and, where appropriate, natural gas. In addition, we are heavily engaged with the region's governments through USAID, MCC, and others to upgrade existing grid infrastructure, encourage regional integration, and implement necessary legislation to foster greater investment in energy diversification.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. David N. Cicilline (#12)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Brain Drain:

Many states in the region, particularly Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, rank among the world leaders for “brain drain.” Young, educated people are leaving the region for Western Europe for better prospects.

Question 12:

Are there frameworks the U.S. has already designed for other parts of the world to assist states in retaining an educated workforce?

Answer 12:

The United States engages with partner countries' higher education institutions to strengthen their capacities to stem brain drain and catalyze economic growth by developing the workforce's skills in areas sought by local employers. We support programs that work with the private sector, government, and academia to help curricula match market needs. In addition, public diplomacy programs requiring a J-1 visa stipulate that program participants return to their home country for a period of two years upon program completion to prevent brain drain. Once home, alumni are actively recruited into US-supported alumni associations to provide a sense of professional purpose and access to local professional networks.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. David N. Cicilline (#13)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Question 13:

Is fear of even greater emigration from the Western Balkans a key issue for those that are skeptical of the region's accession to the EU?

Answer 13:

The prospect of EU accession and access to the EU single market drives reforms in areas such as good governance and sustainable economic growth that discourage brain drain and encourage citizens to build their futures in the countries of the Western Balkans. The United States remains committed to supporting private sector investment and economic development across the region. We are working with governments to promote economic opportunities and high-quality investment that will ultimately lead to greater prosperity and reduce emigration incentives.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. David N. Cicilline (#14)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Serbia & Kosovo:

Tensions between Serbia and Kosovo remain a challenge for the region. Recent flareups demonstrate that those tensions are unlikely to dissipate without a concerted effort amongst regional powers to come to a mutually beneficial agreement.

Question 14:

What is Russia's role in exacerbating the tensions between Serbia and Kosovo? The Russian Ambassador to Belgrade was seen with Serbia's Minister of Defense at a Serbian military installation along the border during recent unrest over license plates. How does Russia benefit from preventing a satisfactory conclusion to this issue?

Answer 14:

The United States and Russia have starkly different visions for the futures of Serbia, Kosovo, and the broader region. Moscow actively sows friction and distrust because it sees such division as in its interest, and leverages its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council with veto power with Serbia, opposing Kosovo's independence and blocking its international integration. In contrast, U.S. strategic goals involve cementing democratic norms and rule of law while combatting corruption across the region. We strongly support the work of the EU-facilitated Dialogue to normalize relations between Serbia and Kosovo and secure their European futures, benefitting all citizens and deepening regional stability.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. David N. Cicilline (#15)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Question 15:

How can we better encourage political actors in the region to move beyond catering to ultra-nationalist elements in their respective states in order to foster better solutions?

Answer 15:

We support political pluralism, media freedom, and a level electoral playing field, where all parties can participate on an equal footing. These are vital for thriving democracies which preserve freedom of expression and belief and allow for diverse voices to be heard. Condemnation of inflammatory nationalist rhetoric or other actions by the international community is necessary to call attention to the problematic nature of ultranationalists and others who inhibit reconciliation between ethnic groups and countries in the region. The United States continues to encourage political actors to deliver tangible benefits for their citizens that can only be secured through dialogue, cooperative efforts, and steps towards reconciliation.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. David N. Cicilline (#16)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Free Press:

Recently, a decline in press freedom has been observed by domestic, regional, and international NGOs. In Serbia, government-friendly tabloids were employed to dox journalists reporting on issues like corruption and organized crime.

Question 16:

How can we partner with regional actors to help strengthen the region's free press?

Answer 16:

The United States continues to champion the importance of a free and independent press to the region in our public and private messaging, as well as to amplify the positive work of regional and country-specific non-governmental organizations in advancing these goals. We also continue to encourage media sector reforms to foster transparency and address violence against journalists. Our embassies regularly collaborate with civil society organizations and media partners in support of timely, impactful programming. We also fund regional programs, such as the Balkan Media Assistance Program and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar by
Rep. David N. Cicilline (#17)
HFAC Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber
Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Question 17:

What oversight does the EU provide in ensuring a free press exists for EU candidate states?

Answer 17:

The EU accession process provides a framework for improving media freedom in EU candidate countries. The European Commission reviews the state of freedom of expression, to include media freedom, in its annual progress reports on enlargement. The United States will continue to work with the EU to promote media freedom throughout the region.